



A sermon by Stephen Atkinson, Minister

November 18, 2007

UU BASICS, PART 1: WHO WE ARE

I don't know if you know, but Alison Nixon, our Music Director, likes to plan ahead. Way last summer she asked me what I was going to preach on today! I'm not even sure I was working here yet. Alison, was I even in Vancouver then? See, she planned to have the choir sing today and she needed to know what kind of music to look for. Well, I had to admit that made sense, so I started to think: "Well, there's a big congregational vote the first Sunday I'm here, then there's a 40th anniversary; [These are the days when the choir was to sing, you see]; then there's Thanksgiving; then along about late October, people will probably be pretty anxious no matter how the vote went, so I'll preach, "Everybody Calm Down!" – which became "Living in Serenity"; and then it'd be November 18th, and I bet with all the changes happening, they might need to think about their identity, who they are as a church. How's that, Alison?" I asked. And she said, ... And here we are!

Now, just like "Everybody Calm Down" became something else over time, today I'm not actually going to talk about who we are as this church. Any serious thinking about identity has to be rooted in the question, "Where do we come from?" This fall of the 40th year of North Shore, we've looked a fair bit at our local history. But our roots go much further back than that. Although religious historians tend to acknowledge *actual* roots only when there's a traceable, unbroken line from one person or group or thought to the next, that method just doesn't work for Unitarian Universalists precisely because we're part of the history of suppressed, oppressed and persecuted believers starting nearly the same time as the earliest forms of Christianity were appearing. And, I have to add that, for the purposes of *this* sermon and *this* train of thought that I'm asking you to ride on with me today, we're going to ignore a lot of other questions about God, Jesus and Christianity that are very worth asking – some other time.

In the first decades and centuries of the Common Era, there was really no such thing as Christianity; there were only people who were adopting ideas attributed to a Jewish man named Jesus; it seems that he'd taught that love is the root of faith instead of obedience to religious law, and that the God of the Hebrews is a God for all people, not just for those from a certain bloodline. Early on there were different, competing ideas about just what Jesus meant and who He was. Some of these were similar to what later came to be called Unitarianism and Universalism.

In fact, both of these terms relate less to a group of people than they do to ideas that arose from independent interpretations of the Gospels. Three early Christian concepts became particular points of contention. The first was the nature of Jesus Himself; some saw Him as a man, or as divine but not equal to God, or as entirely equal and the same *substance* as God, the same Being. The latter became the doctrine of the Trinity: Father, Son and Spirit; but from time to time since then Biblical scholars have failed to find proof in the texts for this concept. The rejection of the Trinity was the first idea labelled Unitarian.

The second idea we have to mention is that of original sin: that all humans were born sinful because of the disobedience of Adam and Eve. This was the conclusion of St. Augustine, an interesting man (and I have to say there are a dozen sermons waiting to jump out of just what I've said so far). Centuries after Augustine, though it's easier to mention it here, others read the Bible differently, rejecting original sin and seeing human beings as innately good. This was the other major idea that came to be associated with Unitarians.

The third idea was the nature of salvation: Jesus was said to have died to save human souls from damnation, but just who was saved? Only Jewish believers? All believers even gentile ones? Or every single soul? Some of the earliest Christians believed that *all beings* would eventually be forgiven for their sins as Jesus had redeemed everyone. This idea came to be called Universalism.

As a means towards political unity, the Roman Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the state religion – in other words religion and the state became joined at the hip. Constantine demanded that church leaders decide on one set of beliefs that all would follow; this was a very Roman way of doing things. At a meeting of over 300 bishops in the year 325, these beliefs were set out in what's now called the Nicene Creed, which is very similar to what almost all Christians now call 'the truth.'

So, why do I have to tell you all these things? It's because our Unitarian Universalist history began in Christianity, but in the kinds of Christian ideas that came to be called *heresies*. And you know what's interesting? The original Greek word that in English became 'heresy' meant *choice*, and by association, the group of people who *choose*. In other words, those who don't just believe or accept without question; those who think and choose. At root, we Unitarian Universalists are heretics. We're the ones who *choose* what we believe.

The immediate corollary of this power we take from other religions, this power not just to *learn* beliefs, but to *choose* them, is that we respect freedom of thought. But, if we respect freedom of thought, with that goes the responsibility to be careful what we think. Such careful, responsible thinking is called *reason*. And what follows from that is that

we respect the freedom of belief, thought and reason of others. We may question their reasoning or disagree with their beliefs or thoughts, but we accept *their* right to choose.

Who are we? We are the ones who think and choose and let others do the same. Where does that lead us next?

It leads, of course, to pluralism, which means that different ideas, voices and identities are represented among us. At this point, I'm focusing on the various ways we think. You see, although at some time in the past, our earliest leaders and churches may have made *one* choice together, we've come to recognize that those of us right here have the right to think and choose, too.

Over time, various kinds of free-thinkers have gathered in our churches. At first it was liberal Christians, then it was the Transcendentalists with their view that human intuition is as powerful a source of truth as is Reason, then it was the social reformers and abolitionists, then the social Darwinists, the humanists and not a few communists, then the Baby Boom parents and their children, then the hippies and the peaceniks. And I don't intend to demean any of these timely and important movements by putting them in a litany like this. My point is just to show that our openness to freedom of thought means that we have been swept by waves of new ideas over and over again.

And right beside this parade of Unitarian phases has been the evolution of Universalism from the self-taught preachers and circuit riders of New England who also visited Eastern Canada, through the wildfire spread of Universalism in 19th century rural communities, through to the warm-hearted, loving but dwindling remnants in the last century as the forgiving God of Universalism became more and more accepted in mainstream Protestantism. After decades of increasing co-operation, the Unitarians and Universalists consolidated into a new denomination in 1961.

Each of these waves and the consolidation itself met its resistance because it's not always easy to put our handshakes where our principles are. Far too often freedom of thought for *me* doesn't translate into freedom of thought for *you*, and we also become caught up in the sense of power that comes from control, whether it be of a denomination or a committee. So we live with our pluralism frequently in an uneasy state of *détente*.

We feel that at North Shore Unitarian also but with increasing hopefulness and pride that we're maturing in our acceptance of diversity. We experienced sharply distinct points of view about our property yet we have agreed to see the process through together to whatever outcome it will have.

Likewise, a couple of members here have told me with admirable honesty and courage that it's uncomfortable for them to hear the word 'prayer' and, I interpret, to feel drawn

into participating in it when it becomes part of worship. Now, I do not mean for anyone to feel coerced into joining in with something that you don't believe. What I intend is that you who meditate are invited to meditate, you who pray are invited to pray, and you who prefer silent contemplation have space for that, perhaps not all at the same time or in the same vocabulary, but at that central moment in the service where we descend into the search for deeper meaning.

But it's a wonderful example of our fundamental roots that this conversation takes place. If no one had challenged their clergy in the past, none of us would have this place now. If all of us saw things exactly the same way, we'd lose out on the richness that comes from our different collective and personal sources of truth. If this church stays exactly the same, then we won't become in the future beyond our own lives the Unitarian Universalist church that the future needs, just as ours would not have come to be if churches before us had never changed.

So who are we? We're the ones who tackle the results of our freedom to choose and learn the hard lessons of living in pluralistic diversity.

But, you know, take a look around. In many, many ways we are very similar to each other. To live with such diversity we must also have deep commonalities. Without them the centrifugal forces of our diversity would spin us apart.

We're pretty smart and/or educated, and we like that about ourselves. We seek intellectual as well as spiritual nourishment when we come together. We're most often economically comfortable if not well-off, but, if we go by the best American demographic study which there's little reason to believe would be different in our country, our median income – that is, if we listed all our incomes from lowest to highest in a long list, the one that would be exactly halfway along the list – that median income would be definitely middle class, certainly not wealthy, but not poor either. I suspect that's less true of our congregation given our location, but it's probably more true than we tend to think.

The aspect of what we hold in common about which we're the most ambivalent is that we tend to represent only a segment of the population. This is true of the majority of our churches in both Canada and the United States; we are overwhelmingly Caucasian and tend to feel quite guilty about our difficulty in attracting those of other races. Members of North Shore represent a broader range of nationalities than I've come across in American churches, but still almost all of us are ethnically European.

I said that 'we're' ambivalent about this fact of our demographics, but I should take ownership of that. *I'm* ambivalent about it. On the one hand, I do feel that if we lived entirely according to our principles it would be far easier to build a congregation that better reflects the range of populations in our area; in Vancouver, that would mean that we'd have more Asian and First Nation Unitarians. On the other hand, we *are* a church

that appeals to this demographic, and we have a long way to go to be better at what we do, let alone to become something we're not. We don't try to be a church for *all* faiths because there are faiths that we entirely disagree with, even if we believe in their right to exist. I'm not sure we can ever be a church for *all* people because what in goodness' name would that look like? It would have to be something like a Wal-Mart of religion, a lowest common denomination. We must never aim for that.

Something we hold in common that we rarely talk about is that we have similar needs. Besides our desire for intellectual stimulation, spiritual growth and aesthetic inspiration, we have a longing for community, for friends, for talk, for hugs and for held hands. We seek a place to soothe our loneliness, in whatever form it appears; we hope for support to hold us up, even if we're already strong. We come together looking our best, but we also need a place to cry, to despair, to be confused and to disclose the realities of our private lives. Some of us are poor and even hungry; some are depressed and wonder about living; some of us are addicts and ashamed; some are grieving as we smile; some are ill though we look hale and hearty; some of us live in closets built by whatever secrets most control us. We are not free from the troubles of our times, rather we are immersed in them. Our mere, naked humanity also holds us together, perhaps more than anything else.

There's a way in which we're the same that we love: we share the same values. In fact, we talk about this so much that I'm not going to say more about it today. That is, other than to reiterate a challenge I've mentioned before and will continue to remind you and myself of; our values are nothing if we don't *live* them. They're just words in air or on paper unless our hands and our feet are acting them out. Value as a verb must move our bones and muscles, not just our lips and our tongue.

So... who are we? Within our pluralism, we are the same even as we think differently. We are the ones who choose even as we struggle against feeling we have no choice. We are the ones who hold human beings in high regard even though we might be down on ourselves. We are the ones who value the questions, even as we wish mightily, yes, even wish to *God* that we'd find some answers someday.

We are Unitarian Universalists. We are you, and you, and you, and you, and me. We are him and her, and even *them*. We are everyman, everywoman, everychild. Who else could we be?

Namaste.